

Miller's monument

■ **Senate president:** *Now that a building has been named in his honor, Mike Miller needs to earn it.*

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THOMAS V. Mike Miller rules the Maryland Senate with a laugh, a quote and an instinct for control.

He stands as the record-holder for Senate presidents in length of service, and a \$24 million Senate office building was officially named for him yesterday.

But what, exactly, has he done to warrant that honor?

As the 2001 General Assembly session begins today in Annapolis, Mr. Miller's place in state history has yet to be written. He's a state leader, largely unknown outside his chamber, who doesn't promote big ideas or big pieces of legislation.

He's a reactive politician, not a big-picture visionary like his counterpart in the House of Delegates, Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr. And yet he holds one of the three most powerful positions in Maryland government.

Mr. Miller runs a decentralized Senate, giving independent-minded members — especially his chairmen — wide latitude. He lets them take the lead on major legislation.

Yet every big bill of the past 14 years — publicly financed sports stadiums, education-aid formulas, abortion-rights laws, gun-control

statutes — passed or failed with his behind-the-scenes leadership.

He has fought with governors when it suited him, and placated them when it suited him. But he almost always helps get administration bills passed, even when he doesn't agree with them.

Stability and predictability are hallmarks of Mr. Miller's Senate. Rarely has his chamber been out of control, gridlocked or aimless.

His skills are largely political. He cares deeply about his Democratic Party and about local judicial and executive appointments. Yet he has used the talents of Republican senators wisely and acknowledged them generously.

Until last month, he ruled the Senate unchallenged. But then a rump faction tried to toss him out — and failed. Now Republicans have been diminished by being denied a seat at leadership meetings. Other dissidents will receive similar demotions.

Mr. Miller faces his biggest challenge on two fronts. One is to heal the rift between senators who yearn for leadership roles and those who wield that power. This requires delicate political footwork, which Mr. Miller excels at.

His other test is to prove he deserves to have his name on that new building. Longevity in high office isn't enough. It's time for Mr. Miller to take a more proactive role in the State House, to set forth his own goals and agenda — for the Senate and for Maryland.